

SARS Update for Weekly VHA Call to VISN/Facility Leadership

4/4/03

The Office of Public Health and Environmental Hazards continues to track the evolving epidemiology and public health issues surrounding SARS in order to appropriately prepare VA providers and the health care system.

What we know about SARS

CDC Definition of a suspected Case: Respiratory illness of unknown etiology with onset since February 1, 2003 and the following criteria:

- Measured temperature \geq 100.5 degrees Fahrenheit (38 degrees Centigrade) AND
- One or more clinical findings (cough, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, hypoxia or x-ray findings of pneumonia or acute respiratory distress syndrome) AND
- Travel within 10 days of onset of symptoms to mainland China, Hong Kong, Hanoi, or Singapore OR
- Close contact (cared for, lived with, or had direct contact with secretions or body fluids) of a patient known or suspected to have SARS.

Cases: As of April 2, 2223 cases with 78 deaths have been reported in 78 countries, mostly in Asia, with 720 cases and no deaths reported in the US.

Transmission: Appears to be primarily via respiratory droplets and secretions as well as from contaminated objects.

Etiology: Unknown at this time. Likely a virus possibly of either the paramyxovirus or corononavirus family.

VA Actions Taken on SARS

Communications: VA SARS website established:

Internet <http://www.publichealth.va.gov/SARS>

Intranet: <http://vaww.vhaco.va.gov/phshcg/SARS>

Regular updates will be posted and given as needed to various groups, conference calls, etc.

VA Policy: VA will follow CDC's guidance on triage of patients, diagnosis, management of exposure in health care settings and infection control practices.

Education: A VA SARS wall chart has been created and will be widely distributed today for emergency rooms, clinics and other clinical sites on SARS diagnosis, infection control measures, specimen collection, reporting and treatment issues. All updates and educational materials will be available on the VA SARS website. VA has arranged and widely publicized availability of an education conference call on SARS sponsored by CDC and WHO for Friday, April 4.

Infection Control Measures: Since a very large proportion of reported SARS cases have been among health care workers who have delivered care to cases, infection control measures are extremely important in health care settings where suspected or confirmed SARS patients receive care. In short, personal protective equipment appropriate for standard, contact and airborne precautions (hand hygiene, gown, gloves, and N95 respirator) in addition to eye protection are recommended. See VA or CDC websites for further information.

Reporting: VA health care providers should report suspected or confirmed cases of SARS to their hospital infection control practitioner who will report to state or local health departments and CDC as well as to your VISN Office.